

**Lister Sinclair**

I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas, with Part 8 of David Cayley's series, The Education Debates.

The name of Albert Einstein has become a synonym for deep and original thought, but not for formal education. Einstein did poorly at school and when he was finally persuaded to take a university degree for the sake of his career, Einstein wrote in his diary, "One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect that after I had passed the final examination I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful for an entire year. It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle," Einstein continued, "that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry. For this delicate little plan, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom. It is a grave mistake," he concluded, "to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty. Education without coercion is our subject tonight on Ideas as we look into two types of non-compulsory education--the home school and the free school. Part 8 of The Education Debates by David Cayley.

**David Cayley**

John Holt was a school teacher who became well known in the mid 1960s through a pair of influential books called 'How Children Fail' and 'How Children Learn'. These books suggested ways in which schooling could be improved and brought more into line with the way children learn. Later, Holt's questions grew more searching until he finally came to consider the very idea of education as an imposition. In his book 'Instead of Education', he defined education as "learning cut off from life and done under the pressure of bribe or threat, greed or fear." Why should such coercion, or enticement be necessary, he wondered. If learning is simply our natural The home, Holt felt, avoids this threat of failure and embarrassment and so provides a

faculty of acquiring the knowledge or the abilities that fit our purposes, why segregate this faculty in special institutions? With such questions in mind, Holt began to encourage what came to be called "home schooling", although he did not at first like the term. In the spirit of the sixties, parents critical of the education system were taking their children out of school or never sending them. Holt supported this moment and in 1977 he founded 'Growing Without Schooling', a small, bimonthly magazine intended to offer parents whose children were not in school, and their children, too, eventually, a place where they could exchange stories, ideas and experiences. A book called 'Teach Your Own' followed in 1981. In interviewed John Holt for Ideas in 1982 at his office in Boston and he told me that one of the great advantages unschooled children enjoy is the chance to pursue their interests in an atmosphere of security and trust.

**John Holt**

Learning is, by definition, is exploration, it's risk. It means moving from the known and the certain into the unknown and the uncertain. And people simply will not do it unless they are made to feel secure. People who try to teach adults new skills, new ideas know that they have to spend an extraordinary amount of time reassuring them and making them feel that they are in a minimum risk situation and that they're not going to be laughed at and criticized and so forth and so forth. And this is one of the requirements of learning and it's one of the requirements that the schools quite spectacularly fail to satisfy, where risk and threat and humiliation and punishment quiver in the air every second. Where, you know, nothing else happens to a child who makes a mistake, she or he is almost certain to be laughed at by his fellow students.

**David Cayley**

superior foundation for learning. It also provides a flexibility that's very difficult to

achieve in schools, and this allows children

**John Holt**

I'm often asked why is the family and the home and the world around the home a better educational milieu than school? Why does it work better? Well, one reason is because the numbers are smaller and this makes possible a kind of flexibility of curriculum and schedule and so forth which is not impossible in schools, but which schools have not chosen to try to get. I mean, you could ... schools could be a great deal more like families than they are, and I, as a classroom teacher, had, I think, a lot of the spirit of a happy, large family in the classroom. It's ... but schools have not chosen to do that. They have--and for a hundred years--made their model the factory, not the family and they see education as a quasi-industrial process and they talk about it in terms of delivery and control and so forth and so forth. So, as I say, we have in the home a flexibility of schedule and curriculum which boils down to things like this, that a child reading a book doesn't have to be interrupted until she or he finishes the book. Children can finish things. They never finish things in school. They get used to not finishing things. Children can do things as well as they can, and there's a strong instinct of what (unclear) called workmanship in young children. They may be clumsy, but they like to do things as well as they can and they hate being, little children in school hate having their pictures taken away before they're finished or told that they can't finish the thing they're making. I mean, it's a deep offense to their sense of workmanship. Later on, they get used to the idea that you don't care about anything you do in school and you just do it well enough to get by and that sense of workmanship is lost. But in the home it need not be.

**David Cayley**

Another advantage of the home, in Holt's view, is the knowledge that parents have of their own children. A good teacher is responsive to his student's state, Holt says, and parents have

more chance to direct their own learning.

natural advantages in developing this quality.

**John Holt**

People who teach their own children really like their own children, and they know them better. This is extremely important for teaching. One of the things I learned slowly and painfully as a teacher is that what people are capable of learning or tackling depends very much on their mood, their spirit. When I described in I guess 'Never Too Late', giving cello lessons to an eight-year-old boy when I myself had been playing only about a year, and I realized that in the course of no more than a 45-minute lesson this boy could go through a complete cycle of energy and confidence, try all kinds of difficult things, to despondency and despair--I'll never learn (unclear) you know, kind of ... And then back up to energy and confidence when he was on his high cycle, I could urge him to try new things. I could say ... correct him, I could say, "No, that's sharp, do it again," and when he was in his down cycle I had to say, "Take it easy, Bill, it's okay, you're all right, you know, don't worry about it." And now this sensitiveness to the mood of the learner is an absolute essential in teaching and ... it's almost by definition and certainly very difficult to attain in a classroom, although schools could do better than they do. But they don't even try. And parents read the signals by which their children say I'm bored, I'm confused, I don't understand, I'm frightened, you're pushing me too hard. And they learn, as I eventually did, you know, when to back off and when to wait and when to say, well, think it over for a while, there's no rush on this. It's very difficult to do in a school situation, not least of all because in the school situation the students--and this is just as true of graduate students as of young children--make a point of not letting the teacher know when they're confused or when they're under strain. And even the kindest teachers--and I think I can call myself that in a classroom situation--may have to spend

two-thirds of the year before you get to a point where students will confess uncertainty or confusion. And many won't do it even then.

John Holt, recorded in 1982. Three years later, sadly, at the age of only 52, he died. Holt Associates, the organization he had founded, carried on, as did its magazine, 'Growing Without Schooling'. The editor for the last twelve years has been Susannah Sheffer. She came to work at Holt Associates shortly after John Holt's death, but she had known Holt. 'How Children Fail' is a book about a fifth grade teacher working with fifth grade students. I was in fifth grade at the time, so I opened it and it was very easily captivating. It was about a teacher working with kids that were, seemed to me to be like me and my classmates. So it was a very easy read. He writes clear prose and it was about kids. So I basically thought, "How does this man know so much about us? How does he understand? Why don't my teachers understand in the same way that he does?" I gradually found the rest of his books--this is over the next four years or so. By the time I was fourteen or so I had read his book 'Instead of Education', which was considerably more radical than 'How Children Fail'. Instead of education was critiquing the entire notion of education and schooling. And I agreed with him, still. And there I was still in school. So I wrote to him and said essentially that, you know, I'm this school student and I agree with you and I want you to understand that I really agree. It was very important to me that he understand that I wasn't just a kid that wanted to get out of school, that I really agreed with his critique in a sophisticated way. I wanted to get that across. And he wrote back. And the most wonderful thing he did in writing back was to say, "Feel free to write whenever you want." So he gave me liberty to have an extended correspondence with him, which we did for many years. And to make a long story short, at a certain point I began to get involved in the home schooling work in a bunch of different ways. And that led me to working at Holt Associates a few months after his death.

### David Cayley

for many years before that. The friendship began, she says, when she was ten years old and took down his book 'How Children Fail' from her parents' bookshelf in their New York City home.

### Susannah Sheffer

#### David Cayley

During the twelve years that Susannah Sheffer has edited 'Growing Without Schooling', there has been a considerable expansion of the movement John Holt helped to start. Three of my own children grew up unschooled. The oldest, now in university, never attended school. The younger two began school by their own choice at adolescence. How many others have done the same is a matter of guess work. For the United States, I have heard current estimates as high as a million people. So when I sat down with Susannah Sheffer at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts last year, I asked her about this number.

#### Susannah Sheffer

The joke about how many home schoolers it takes to change a light bulb is that estimates vary and there's no way to know then that's really the answer to your question. You cannot know. Even in a state like Massachusetts, in just one state we do not even have a concrete number. So it's not even a question of getting a number in one state and multiplying it by 50 to get the number in the U.S. There are only estimates. And actually, the numbers that Holt Associates feels comfortable using are more like half a million or maybe 600,000 families which, of course, the families have, let's say, an average of two or three kids and that comes to a lot of children or, you know, three times as many children. But really the point about it, more than any precise figure, I think, is it is a small

and growing minority. It is, on the one hand, not so huge a percentage of the population that's going to threaten the school establishment and, at the same time, it is growing. More and more people are leaving, and they represent a significant critique of established schooling. So I think both those seemingly opposing things are true.

### **David Cayley**

Growing--you're confident about.

### **Susannah Sheffer**

Yes. I am confident. Growing in terms of sheer numbers and in terms of the types of people doing it. I get increasing numbers of calls and letters from young people who are, let's say, 14 or 15 and they are initiating the idea of home schooling. They have done the reading. They have decided they want to

### **Susannah Sheffer**

Yes, accepted with some reluctance. It's basically not the right word. You know, we always say most of it doesn't happen at home and it doesn't look much like school. A lot of it does happen at home, but they're certainly not cooped up at home is that point that we're trying to convey. It's a word that's made it into the language. I used to discuss this with John Holt. I said to him, why are you not more uncomfortable with the word? And he said it's now become the word. You know, you can say all sorts of things about, well, we call it children learning outside of school, it's children learning in the community and then the average person nowadays will say to me, oh, you mean home schooling. That's what they've heard of. And there's no sense going to such lengths to avoid it, I think. I just ... what I try to do is take that word and have it mean, use it to describe the things that I'm talking about. Make sure that it's clear that I don't mean keeping kids cooped up. I think that the name of the magazine, 'Growing Without Schooling', is actually the perfect phrase, but you can't walk around saying all the time these kids are growing without schooling. It sort of ... that would sound almost too affected to say that right

leave school. It grows out of their own critique of it. I think of them as some of the most important voices in school reform today. These young people who figure out why school isn't working for them and decide to leave and can now call that decision home schooling in a way that perhaps before might have been called dropping out or something, you know, more negative, with more negative connotations. So it's growing on that level. It's growing because there are more single parents doing it, more people of colour, more people of all the sorts of categories that people thought were not home schooling, in fact, are. So it's growing in that way as well.

### **David Cayley**

And is home schooling a name that you've just accepted over the years?

now. So we've got the word home schooling and I think that's here to stay.

### **David Cayley**

The term "home schooling" has become standard, but the practices it refers to remain diverse and inconsistent. To say a family is home schooling only tells you what the children don't do. What they do do can vary considerably.

### **Susannah Sheffer**

There are all sorts of ways of applying that word to your life and the movement is composed of people who do creative school in their home in some measure, have a schedule that looks much like a school schedule. Maybe even they have the American flag and lessons and school materials and then there are people who are very much trying to do something much more radically different. What I think is interesting about home schooling is that it is such a broad term that people can start out one way and change. They can start out replicating the school in the home and end up doing something much freer within six months or a year. It's much easier to make change in home schooling than it is to

make change in schools. So that, you know, in school, if you want to change the textbook it's a major lobbying effort. In home schooling, if you want to change you're using, you put down one and pick up the other. It's that much easier. So the very fact that it's difficult to define is, I think, a good thing and a liberating thing for those that are doing it, I think what home schooling reveals is that the way things are in schools is not the way they have to be. And what that means for individual children, for example, can be something as specific as a child who in school was thought of as a poor reader in home schooling becomes someone who loves to read and spends the whole day in a library. That's a simple example, but to me it's extremely profound because it's one example of the ways in which we make judgements about children, their capabilities, what they're like. You know, we make statements about the nature of children based on how they behave in school. People walk around saying things like children won't learn unless they're made to, children aren't motivated. People have all sorts of ideas about children which, from my perspective, are not so. And why are they not so from my perspective? Because I'm seeing young people in a different context. The young people I know are extremely self-motivated, don't need to be made to learn, don't need to be shown how. Why is that? Because they're special kinds of children? No, not from my perspective. It's because they're in a situation that makes very different assumptions about them. So home schooling changes the assumptions. It changes the way we interpret and talk about what's happening in such a way that different things happen, I guess. We find out that young people don't need to do things at the same time and in the same way, which is a really classic assumption school makes. In school, if you aren't doing first grade work in first grade, it's a problem. In the home schooling set-up, there's no need for that to be a problem. Children can learn to read in home schooling at any age and it's fine.

Home schooling, in a deeper way, questions

because they can do whatever they need to do or want to do.

### **David Cayley**

What do you think has been revealed by home schooling?

### **Susannah Sheffer**

the notion that you need to prepare for life and then live it. The whole notion of education as preparation is something which children learn very well in school. You get young people saying, you know, I need to go to school, I need to or I wouldn't whatever they then say. I wouldn't have a good job, I wouldn't be able to do what I want to do. And the home schoolers that I know best are living their lives right now. They are doing whatever the thing is that the school students are saying they want one day to do. So that the home schoolers whose passion is veterinary medicine, let's say, are apprenticing to veterinarians perhaps. The ones who are passionate about writing are writing. And working with real writers. They're not learning about it; they're actually doing it, of course, in the process of that they're learning about it. So for me, the revelatory nature of home schooling is what it tells us about what's possible for human beings, which sounds extremely broad, but I now know, from looking at young people who have never been to school, how dedicated, committed, serious, focussed and intent on real work young people can be.

### **David Cayley**

How about finding opportunities to do those things? It's a world in which schooling is the norm, in which neighbourhoods may be largely deserted during the day, in which apprenticeship as a normal practice has disappeared. You're saying that they're still finding ways.

### **Susannah Sheffer**

Yes, I feel two seemingly contradictory things about that point. On the one hand, yes, we live in a world in which school is the norm, in which knowledge and skill is generally perceived to be very inaccessible and scarce and hoarded, so it's not clear to people how you would simply approach a veterinarian and ask to work with him or her and so forth. And I think that's true and I think that much of the experience of home schooling today is characterized by the fact that school is the norm and, as well--this is the seemingly contradictory point--I also believe that these opportunities are much more accessible and possible than we think because I see young people all the time who have managed to pursue the things they want to pursue without there being a special program for it. These young people do simply walk in or phone up the scientist and say, hey, I'm 14 years old, I'm really interested in biology, could I hang around your lab, could I watch, could I help you in exchange for getting to see what you do? And I find that adults are surprisingly interested in doing this, in helping young people in this way because they are adults who didn't want to go into teaching as a full-time profession because they are architects or scientists or artists or writers or whatever it is, but they do have the impulse to pass on what they know and love to young people. And maybe these adults couldn't see how to do that without Almost everything you can imagine. A young woman following a newspaper reporter around on her route. Young people working with artists, you know. Let's say preparing their canvases in exchange for getting to watch them. Helping out at the nature preserve. Helping out in the lab. Helping out in almost any kind of office you can imagine. Offices that do political work, social action work. I know a boy as young as seven who's helping out at a peace organization, a newsletter that's published about local peace issues. And he is able to do volunteer work for them. He is nine now and has done it since he was seven years old. And it's a way for him of making a connection and doing what he wants to do.

being a teacher, you know, with a capital "T". And when you say to them, you know, there's a way to be a scientist and yet have a young person hang around and show an interest in your work, the adults, too, become very excited by it. I think that's why it really works. It's not just the young people's energy that's making these connections. It's the adult finding that it touches something in them as well. I am a professional writer who acts as a writing mentor to many home school young people and it's absolutely mutually rewarding. There's no question that I'm getting a great deal out of it. They are getting the chance to have their work critiqued by an adult writer, but I have that same impulse. I don't want to be a writing teacher full-time, but I love helping young writers. So this is a way, it's a model, it's a way for me to do it. And so I think the world is more accessible, more open and more welcoming than people would think. And home school has demonstrated that.

### **David Cayley**

What are some other examples of apprenticeships that you've seen or informal apprenticeships that you've seen working amongst people you know?

### **Susannah Sheffer**

And again, not having to wait. You know, he's not told "some day when you grow up perhaps you can work for the peace movement". That's again, the home schooling philosophy is, okay, let's figure out a way that you can do that now in a way that's appropriate to where you are as a seven-year-old. But think how much experience he'll have, so to speak. He's not thinking in these terms, but think how much he will have already done by the time he is, you know, 16 or 18 or whatever it might be when the world expects him to start thinking in terms of getting a job. You know, I know a young woman who has opened her own store at age 18--this is a home schooled young woman--and people think that that's the most

amazing success story. It's actually an extremely natural progression because she had been doing real work since she was about five years old, doing volunteer work for a nature centre, for a watershed association and so forth, volunteering at a store. Doing so many things, that by the time she opened that store it was just the most natural next step for her. That's a really classic home school story, I think.

### **David Cayley**

My first thought was, "but the girls I know aren't like this". Now, the girls I knew best were girls who were not in school, who were all the time surprising me with their trust in themselves, their self-confidence, their ability to do what they thought was right and not what other people thought they ought to do. I was working with girls, primarily girls, as a writing mentor and I would offer comments on their writing and feedback and they would, with such self-confidence, they would say things like, "Well, this is what I'm planning to do, these are my goals for this piece," you know, "well, I take your point and I'm going to use this suggestion but on the other hand, in this other regard, I'm going to do ... go with my original plan" and that sort of thing. They were amazingly trusting of themselves and yet also open to and responsive to an adult's suggestion. So I thought to myself, the girls I know don't seem to be losing their voices, distrusting themselves and so forth. And I wanted to explore somewhat more systematically if that was so by doing in-depth formal interviews with home schooled girls. And I ended up doing 55 in-depth interviews with home-schooled girls around the country and, indeed, found that, by and large, they were doing better, to say it in a short way. And there were reasons for that, you know. It wasn't just a matter of, well, these are lucky kids or they're born into great families. I mean, those things are perhaps also true, but it was that home schooling was giving them much greater opportunity for trusting themselves, for having control over their lives, for making important choices, for

Susannah Sheffer has written two books about home schooling, 'Because We Love To: Home Schoolers at Work' and, more recently, 'A Sense of Self: Listening to Home Schooled Adolescent Girls'. The latter book was her response to recent research by Harvard's Carol Gilligan and others showing that girls suffer a dramatic loss of self-confidence at adolescence. Not necessarily, was Sheffer's view.

### **Susannah Sheffer**

listening to themselves, for being listened to by others. All those things that the other researchers were saying was not happening. I think that school is very often thought of as a given in young people's lives nowadays. In fact, one of the well-known studies about adolescent girls says, in passing, all girls go to school. And of course, when someone like me, when I read that, I think, well, that's not so, you know. Thousands don't. And what is that experience like was the question that I wanted entered into this discussion of how to help adolescent girls. And you see, that's also the point that once the discussion of adolescent girls began to move from an outline of the problem to a search for solutions, then I felt especially sort of intent about getting home schooling into that discussion because I felt that the home schooling had some thoughts about solutions. And I don't necessarily mean that the solution had to be home schooling in all cases, literally, but elements of it could be applied. In other words, if people worrying about adolescent girls or worrying, you know, why don't they have the confidence to pursue their own goals, well, what I'm saying is let's look at some of the structural issues at work here. School isn't about pursuing your own goals. School does not say to students what do you want to do? How can we help you? You know, you'd like to pursue an interest in science. Let's see if we can help you make connections. Imagine if school did the sort of thing we were discussing earlier where it actually helped young people hook up with mentors, let's say. But school doesn't do that.

It says this is what you need to do and we're going to tell you and we're going to, in fact, make you do it. So when you change those variables, and in home schooling young people have the chance to ask themselves the questions--what do I really want to do, what is important to me, how I make my place in the world, how do I learn best, what kind of help do I need and how I go about getting that help. These are very important questions that most young people don't get to ask themselves. So when you think of it in those terms, it's then, to me, no wonder that home schooled adolescent girls are in so many respects doing better psychologically and emotionally. And this is what I wanted to explore and lay out very concretely by reporting on the interviews I'd done.

Most people that home school are not wealthy, by any means. They do have to figure out their lives financially. It often means making a financial sacrifice in order to do it, either by having, if it's a two-parent household, by having one parent forego paid work. But there are home schooling families where both parents are doing paid work. There are home schooling families where there is only a single parent. And you see this increasingly as more and more people are turning to home schooling rather than thinking of it when their children are babies or before they have children. In other words, rather than having it be a well thought-out philosophical choice, more and more people are as well coming to it first out of an urgent desire to get a good situation for their child, who is desperately unhappy in school and then, as they begin to do that, they begin to understand the positive aspect of home schooling. So people are having to configure their lives in such a way as to make this work. I led a discussion group with five home schooled girls, three of whom were living in single-parent families. And they were able to direct their own educations. This is relevant when the young people are of an age that they don't need direct custodial care the way a young child does. And part of our inability to imagine how people without much

### **David Cayley**

Susannah Sheffer attributes the greater self-confidence of home schooled girls to their independent circumstances, which allow them and, in part, require them to act confidently. And she thinks that the advantages these girls enjoy are potentially open to all. It's a common objection to any kind of choice in education that it favours those who are more wealthy or more gifted. But Sheffer disagrees in the case of home schooling. The variety of people who now home school, she says, argue strongly against the idea that home schooling is a form of privilege.

### **Susannah Sheffer**

money can home school has to do with our sense that schooling or education means to hang over young people all day long and doing something to them. And so you think, well, that takes six or seven hours a day. I don't have six or seven hours a day. How can I do it? When you realize that it doesn't take all those hours, that the young people are going to learn through their own activities and their own engagement with the world and their own projects and reading and conversation and work, you realize, all right, this becomes more manageable. And then people work out all manner of flexible arrangements. Whether it's working at home, working part-time, trading time with other families, hooking up with adults, hooking up with other home schoolers and every other creative arrangement that these resourceful people manage to think of, then you realize this is much more possible ... (change tape)

As well, I think it needs to be said that school is not the bastion of equality that it's often thought to be. I've spoken of people who are now home schoolers who were not in any way winners in school. They were often kids who were either failing in school or not doing well at all. They were in, so to speak, the low track in school. And as home schoolers, they're thriving. So for them, home schooling is a



way of ... it actually grants them greater equity, greater chance at the same opportunities that someone who was thriving in school had. And for them, as for many people, school sorts kids into the winners and the losers, the successes and the failures. And home schooling, for many, is a way of breaking out of that whole sorting mechanism, that whole tracking way of thinking about and organizing children. It constructs things in such a different way that someone who might have been a school failure is now not condemned to be a failure. And in that, I think that has to be part of a discussion of whether home schooling is elitist and on whether school promotes equality.

when people hear about the sort of home schooling of which I'm speaking, which when it's described has a lot of phrases about young people making choices, setting their own goals, doing what they want to do, it conjures up for many people a vision of, well, when they think about young people doing whatever they want, they think, well, but how can you have that? Young people who will do whatever they want--watch television or take drugs or sit and stare at the wall. You know, we have a sense that when people are allowed to do what they want, and particularly young people, they do things that are not particular constructive or productive and that the only way to get them to do productive or constructive things is to make them do them, to assign them. The young people I see who are able to choose what to do with their time challenge that notion because they do a whole variety of constructive, interesting, productive, meaningful and engaged things. And even those people who are supportive of freedom sometimes think of it in a way that is emptier than I would think of it. They think of a free child as a child who's running happily across a field or something like that, that that's freedom.

And my image of freedom is, I guess, that but much more. A young person hard at work at the pursuit of her choice. A young person choosing to work hard on an essay during the summertime, as one young friend of mine does, in a way that is unthinkable to her friends

### **David Cayley**

Susannah Sheffer argues that home schooling overturns the idea that education is inherently a contest or a limited resource from which some must necessarily be excluded. It also upsets the idea without schools, few would chose to acquire education. Behind such ideas, Susannah Sheffer says finally, lies fear of freedom, a fear, she thinks home schooling has successfully challenged.

### **Susannah Sheffer**

in school who think summer is when you get to goof off. Freedom is not just the freedom from all sorts of constraints, it's the freedom to throw yourself with a whole heart and with full commitment to whatever it is that you want to do. And I think one of the greatest misconceptions about home schooling comes from people's misconception about what freedom means and what people would do, if given a choice.

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### **David Cayley**

The freedom that Susannah Sheffer prizes in home schooling is also the path that has been taken by a small group of schools called Free Schools. Their most famous ancestor is Summerhill, the school started by English educator A.S. Neill in the 1920s. But a number of American free schools also thrived in the years between 1910 and 1960, under the name of the Modern School Movement. During the 1960s, many new free schools were started, but only a hardy few have survived until today. One that has is a community simply called The Free School in Albany, New York. Founded in 1969 by Mary Loya, it now has around 45 children and eight teachers. The school is located in a downtown neighbourhood, once largely Italian, now largely African American, and it accepts all comers, charging tuition on a sliding scale

according to ability to pay. The community that supports the school also publishes two magazines, 'The Journal of Family Life' and 'Schooling: A Journal of Alternative Education'.

Chris Mercogliano has been a teacher at The Free School for many years and has recently published a book about its history and philosophy called 'Making It Up As We Go Along'. I called on him last year and he told me the notion was that if you leave kids, if you don't manage them constantly, and leave them the space or, you know, the freedom to make their own choices and their own decisions, you know, whether or not it's so cold today that I have to put a hat on or I have to put a jacket on rather than the constant, "Now, come on, you know, don't ... where's your hat and zip up that coat," and this kind of nagging thing around just the simple custodial issues of eating or, you know, dressing warmly for going outside and these things, if you leave kids to make their own decisions based on their own inner messages and their own intelligence and their own mistakes, you know, let them make mistakes and then find out what the consequences of the whatever the bad choice was so that the next time they're making a, you know, an amended choice, I mean, they're going to build in hopefully some learning into the next go-round, you know, they'll be directing that learning process. So you know, we call it autonomy. The kids in our school, even fairly young ones--'cause we have a pre-school--they largely create each day themselves, even in the pre-school we're not shuffling them around in little groups and going from painting time to story time. You'll find in our school, at any age level, that the adults in the school, the teachers, are not the centre of the action in the way you would find it in most conventional classroom situations. And I say most 'cause some, you know, there are plenty of good teachers in the public schools and there are plenty of good teachers in the private schools, and I think any good teacher who really knows their business and loves what they're doing and understands kids, I think they have the sense to get out of the centre and not

me that the school's approach was inspired by an idea he traces back to psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, which is that children ought to be allowed to become, in Reich's expression, "self-regulating".

### **Chris Mercogliano**

just stand there and direct traffic and they know that kids need to follow their own whims and they're confident enough to pull back out of the foreground and put themselves a little bit more in the background and function more as a, you know, as a resource and a mentor and a guide rather than, you know, the boss and the classroom manager. But anyway, in our school you'll find the teachers quite a bit that way. It's like a dance in the pre-school, if you watch sometimes. You know, the kids ... you know, when they need something, when they want something, when they want attention, the teachers are there and they have very good relationships with the teachers and know them well and so they'll go climb in a lap or they'll come and say can you, you know, will you read me a story or whatever. And then when you get into our elementary age groups and then the junior high age kids in what we call the Downstairs, we just call it Downstairs--there are two floors in the building. The pre-school predominantly occupies the upstairs and the older kids predominantly occupy the downstairs. In the Downstairs, the kids are truly self-governing. We do have a structure for that where the kids govern themselves, they make their own rules. Or they make rules for everybody. There are kids have, as it is at Summerhill, everybody has a vote. Kids have one vote and teachers have one vote and we call them Council meetings. At a council meeting, that's where rules can be changed or new ones can be formulated, old ones thrown out. Anyone can call a council meeting any time. If someone has a serious problem and they've really tried to work it out privately in other ways but they just, you know, they can't solve their problem without the support of

everybody, then they call a council meeting. This could be an adult or a child. Doesn't matter. And the moment a council meeting is called, all the action stops. We all gather in a circle in the largest room that we have downstairs. And a chairperson is elected. The meeting is run strictly by Robert's Rules of Order. And the kids become very competent democrats. They learn not only, you know, about the rules of government and how to make motions and how to think through, you know, when you need a policy, for instance, and you know, I often say to the kids, you know, rules don't settle conflicts, for instance, very well. But the kids, you know, when really a policy or a rule is needed to address a safety situation or, you know, whatever, a fairness ... an issue of fairness even the six- and seven-year-olds very quickly learn, you know, to think clearly, okay, well how do we solve this problem? What steps are necessary and then I would say kids also become very adept at Chris Mercogliano says that one of the hallmarks of The Free School is variation. That's why he called his book 'Making It Up As We Go Along'. The school projects no general goals or standards for its students, preferring to deal with each student individually.

### **Chris Mercogliano**

We get kids in so many different conditions when they come that, you know, I think we see our job as helping this one child you know, move along their developmental path according to their nature, according to their speed. Certainly doesn't ... it doesn't work to set general goals: Every seven-year-old shall dot-dot-dot, you know, and every eight-year-old and the thing that Clinton wants to do now with now we're going to test the fourth graders and every fourth grader ... and this whole notion of you set standards and you enforce the standards and by God, you know, you're going to eliminate incompetence or failure or whatever, you know. Finally the American Dream will be realized or all that. I mean, that's a bunch of nonsense. It just doesn't

interpersonal communication. And just a depth of understanding of each other. 'Cause you're all sitting there in that circle and you're going to share the damn problem, whether you like it or not. The policy is everybody goes to the council meeting. You just have to go. Mandatory. You know, kids quickly get that sense of shared concern and they learn to be very good mediators and counsellors and the kids generally all, even the shy ones, over time, learn to be quite articulate and they get over their fear of speaking in a group and speaking their mind and the feedback that we get constantly when kids leave The Free School and go on, at whatever age, to other schools is that there's just this distinctiveness about a Free School child. They're just ... they seem to be mature beyond their years and just very socially adept and very articulate.

### **David Cayley**

work that way. Children don't learn that way. They don't develop that way. It's more of an intuitive approach, I guess, for us. It's ... we do stop all the time and go how's this child doing? You know, is he learning? And if you have an eight-year-old who isn't reading, then you have to stop and say well, why isn't he reading? It's usually a he but it isn't always. Is there a problem, first of all? Is the child dyslexic? Is the child undernourished so that when they get to school they can't concentrate? Is the child being abused? Is there so much fighting at home or is the kid addicted to video games? You know, he's got a Sega in his bedroom at home and ... reading just doesn't measure up to, you know, and he can't even focus that way because he's so jazzed up all the time on Sega. Or maybe he doesn't want to read yet, it's not time for him to learn to read yet. You know, he doesn't want to learn to read and his wiring, his internal wiring, you know, just isn't quite jelled yet, that it would be so difficult if we were to just say, come on, you gotta learn to read, you're eight, you know. What's the matter with you? Do you want people to think you're stupid or ..?

You know, we're going to send you out to be tested. And that eight-year-old ... it's just not ... I mean, you might get him to read but, I mean, the cost would be so high. You'd have to overcome all his resistance. He'd hate it. Chances are he'd hate reading for the rest of his life 'cause it would have been such an onerous chore to do it. Whereas if you wait until he's ten and maybe, you know, his family gets a little happier in the meantime if that was the problem or, you know, whatever, we might have found there was a problem and maybe we were able to help facilitate its solution. And at ten the kid learns to read in three days. I mean, I've seen it. Or three weeks. I mean, Because of our location and because we're the only affordable, quote, "alternative" to the mainstream schools, both public and Catholic, and then we're really the only school that does it differently as well for a hundred miles, where you don't just have the traditional curriculum and, you know, whether you wear a uniform or not or whether it's strict or not, you still march through a daily regimen of whatever it is and the children themselves are not making very many choices and the rules are made for them and, you know, they're punished when they break them and all that sort of thing. You know, we're the only one that does it significantly differently. The word gets around that, you know, somebody's got a child who's on their way to an institution or something because they're misbehaving or a kid is, quote, "learning disabled", which I don't even believe in, but if some parents, thank God, before their kids are sent into some special education program for the rest of their lives, someone ... oh, have you tried The Free School? They're really different down there. You know. Why don't you give them a call? So for about half of our kids, generally, you know, we're ... then we're a school of last resort. But, you know, that entails having sometimes kids who are really angry and antisocial and, you know, they've been so damaged in public school that they don't want to learn anything. Don't even say the word 'math' around them, you know, open up any kind of book around them or start

to me, that's the way you do it. That's the standard.

### **David Cayley**

The Free School has practical as well as philosophical reasons for making the individual the standard. Their student body is extremely diverse and changeable. It can range from sunny, curious children to kids whose previous schooling has been a disaster. And this diversity rules out a uniform academic approach.

### **Chris Mercogliano**

doing any kind of schoolish thing and those kids just ... it's like they have an allergy and they just leave the room. You know, they don't even ... sometimes don't even want to be read to because that invokes in them that same horror situation that they came out of where their teacher's, I guess, in control and they're incompetent and ... you know, you're not doing that kid any favour if you just force them through a curriculum regimen when they're not free to really use their minds and talents. So we'll back off on that and the kids will just take a vacation from the schoolish kind of regimen and they'll do a lot of playing and a lot of conflict and, you know, a lot of banging in the wood shop and throwing pots in the pottery studio and painting. And their parents are freaking out 'cause they're not reading, they're not bringing home work sheets and there's no visible progress in terms of the academic subjects that they were failing before. And meanwhile the clock's ticking, kid's getting older, but we're clear now that, after all these years, that, you know, until you help that child sort some things out and just be happier, you know, that's the place to focus. Kids learning, become aware of their own emotional patterns and helping kids become at peace with themselves. You know, if you take ... if you stop the train long enough and help kids get that, you know, their internal house in order, all that standard stuff, it just ... it's a piece of cake.

You know, Dan Greenberg, the founder of the

Sudbury Valley School over in Massachusetts, loves to say that he's proven it many times. He's the math teacher. He has a PhD in physics or something, chemistry, but he's the math teacher over at Sudbury Valley. And there, you know, he's got any number of kids often who won't do any math at all for, you know, nine years. And they'll ... they have a high school ... they go right through high school. So that he'll have kids come to him in, you know, the eleventh grade who really haven't done much math. I mean, I'm sure they can add and subtract, but you know, they may not have learned even long division yet. Chris Mercogliano has numerous examples of pupils learning in a short time what might otherwise have involved years of labourious study. This suggests first that it's never too late and, second, that there's still time for a childhood in which every minute is not programmed. You learn, he says, when you're ready.

### **Chris Mercogliano**

You know, we have a friend up at the university here who ... he's head of the Atmospheric Sciences Department at SUNI. It's a very well known department across the nation, really. They do a lot of interesting things. And he's got his PhD and he went to a school like ours on Long Island and his mother was a teacher at this school. John must be in his sixties now, but I mean, he learned to read when he was eleven. And his entire childhood ... their community had a school, but it was a very loose kind of school and since the kids all lived there and so on, John's school, he said, was playing in the brook. They had a brook that ran through the little community, the land they'd bought. And he was ... he just ... he was a nature-loving boy. He was outside all the time. Barefoot catching tadpoles and whatever. Watching the water flow by and he never read a lick. And then at eleven he saw another kid with a magazine and he was fascinated by it. Probably one of those theme kind of ... you know, might have been a cowboy mag ... I don't know. But anyway, he

So his claim, I think, is that in 20 what he calls contact hours, I mean, it's 20 hours that the kid spends with him in a classroom and sitting at a table, that he can teach them the entire real numbers system. I mean, just everything. Everything that you'd learn in grades one through eight, anyway, in a standard school, he can do in 20 hours. And the kid can test out at a high level, you know, if you gave him a standardized test at that point.

### **David Cayley**

wanted to read the magazine. He just had this sudden goal--I want to read this magazine.

Damn, I don't know how to read. And so he just said ... his mother was ... I think it was his mother, but he went to one of the teachers anyway. "Teach me to read." And he learned in a week, you know, and he went to public school actually not long after that and what he found when he hit public school was that he was, you know, way ... behind the other kids in these very subject areas. But I think he said within, I don't know, two months or three months, you know, just doing some work at home and just struggling with the textbooks or whatever he had to do, within three months he was at the top of the class. It was a cinch. And then he was bored to death after that because it was, you know, it was so easy and so slow. But he just didn't need that first six years of academic training. He just never needed it. And that's proven out 'cause he's a PhD today, you know, and he's also a very happy fellow, very young at heart, even today. He's really ... I like ... you know, he's a dear man. And he's very grateful to have had that.

He realizes how different he is, especially in the university world, how different his past is than any of his colleagues. I mean, he's immensely grateful that he got to ... that he got to grow up that way.

### **David Cayley**

A free school education, in Chris Mercogliano's opinion, inoculates students against what Ivan

Illich calls the 'myth of education'. This myth holds that learning requires a special process, a special place and a special class of experts to oversee it. It holds that the things to be learned must be broken down into their component parts or skills and these pieces assimilated at the appropriate age and in the

**Chris Mercogliano**

We try to correct that myth so that every kid, at least if they can spend a year with us, or hopefully two or three or four or five, they ... they leave with that sense of I am a capable person, I have tremendous resources, you know, the world is full of resources, you know, I really ought to be able to figure out a way to do pretty much anything I want to do, that I'm capable. I can learn what I need to learn. I can find those resources. I can find the help I need. The world's going to support me. I can do it.

\* \* \*

**Lister Sinclair**

On Ideas tonight, you've heard Part 8 of The Education Debates by David Cayley. Our series continues tomorrow night with a program featuring learning theorist Frank Smith and renegade school teacher John Taylor Gatto. The schedule for the entire series is available on the CBC website. Go to [www.radio.cbc.ca](http://www.radio.cbc.ca) and look for Ideas.

appropriate order. Such beliefs, Chris Mercogliano says finally, create dependency and undermine self-reliance. What he hopes for his students, therefore, is that they be able to live in the world unhampered by this myth.